



Excess of lead closes beaches

High levels raise health concerns

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BY ALIYAH SHAHID

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The federal Environmental Protection Agency has called for the immediate closing of three waterfront sites along the Raritan Bay in Old Bridge and Sayreville due to health concerns after finding high levels of lead in the area.

"We found very, very high levels of lead," Walter Mugdan, the EPA's director of the Emergency and Remedial Response Division for the region, said earlier this week. "It's way above what anybody would think would be appropriate. ... It's a matter of concern."

Mugdan said the contaminated soil was found around the western jetty near Cheesequake Creek in Old Bridge, at a small beach north of the jetty in Sayreville, and at the Laurence Harbor sea wall in Old Bridge. The EPA has recommended those areas be closed immediately.

According to the EPA's website, lead is considered a hazard when it is equal to or exceeds 1,200 parts per million in children's play areas.

At the Laurence Harbor sea wall area, the range of lead sampled was as high as 142,000 parts per million. The sea wall is about 2,345 feet long.

At the western jetty near Cheesequake Creek, the highest levels found were 198,000 parts per million. The average in the area was 52,399 parts per million. The jetty's size depends on the tide, but is about 755 feet long and 20 to 30 feet wide.

At a half-acre beach area in Sayreville, just north of the Cheesequake Creek jetty, the range of lead sampled was the same as at the jetty -- as high as 142,000 parts per million.

The EPA conducted the tests last September and released the results last week.

Mugdan said he was particularly concerned about children playing on the beach, as they might accidentally ingest sand or track sand from their shoes inside their homes. He also said fishermen who stand on nearby jetties could also be exposed.

Extreme exposure to lead can cause neurological damage, kidney disease, cardiovascular problems and reproductive toxicity, according to the EPA website.

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Mugdan said the EPA is awaiting test results that will determine if fish and other marine creatures have been affected.

Yesterday morning, Jerry Bonnett, 69, of Westfield, was one of about 10 fishermen casting their lines into the waters near Cheesequake Creek. Bonnett was hoping to catch dinner for his family. Dressed in waist-high, khaki waders and black rubber boots, Bonnett said he has been fishing in the area for 40 years.

The area is popular with fishermen and while swimming is prohibited, bathers are sometimes seen in the water.

Old Bridge Business Administrator Michael Jacobs said the township is cooperating with the EPA and hopes to have signs and split-rail fences up in the next few weeks. Jacobs said

previous tests conducted by the state Department of Environmental Protection did not reveal how widespread the problem was. "The EPA found lead outside of that scope, in areas we didn't know about. We were surprised, but are going to do whatever the EPA tells us," he said.

While the EPA isn't ready to point fingers, the mayors of Sayreville and Old Bridge, in a statement last week, blamed former paint manufacturer National Lead Industries for the contamination. National Lead owned a 400-acre paint pigment manufacturing plant in Sayreville and a refining operation in Perth Amboy until the 1980s.

Several calls this week to National Lead Industries, whose headquarters are in Dallas, were not returned.

Beth Totman, an EPA spokeswoman said it's too early to address blame and the goal now is to begin cleanup. She said there are cases where the EPA funds projects and then retroactively enforces payment from a party it later deems responsible for the contamination.

Lead slag was used to create a sea wall in Laurence Harbor in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Over the years, lead chipped off the sea wall and has been found on nearby beaches, Old Bridge Mayor James Phillips said.

Sayreville Mayor Kennedy O'Brien said his borough has been aggressively seeking proposals to redevelop the beachfront.

"We have the opportunity to create a great waterfront amenity for the people of Sayreville," he said. "National Lead needs to work with the EPA to conduct an immediate and comprehensive remediation program. Because we know the responsible party, there is no reason for this project to languish."

Mugdan said the boroughs asked that the EPA to place the sites on a Superfund list so federal money would be available for the cleanup. But that would mean more tests. "It's not going to happen in a month or even a year," he said. "My guess is on a site like this, a longer-term remedy will be needed."

In the meantime, some fisherman, like Bonnett, will continue to fish. "I've been fishing here forever," he said, adding after a moment of reflection, "But I might advise my grandchildren not to."

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